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On Schlesinger and Ellsberg: A Reply

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Daniel Ellsberg's reply to Arthur Schlesinger's "Eyeless in Indochina" (NYR, October 21) has been delayed. Meanwhile, the following reply has been received from Leslie Gelb, whose views were discussed in Mr. Schlesinger's essay. Mr. Gelb was the director of the task force that produced the Pentagon Papers. Further comment by Mr. Ellsberg and Mr. Schlesinger will appear in coming issues.

-The Editors

At one point in his essay "Eyeless in Indochina," Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., notes that he and Daniel Ellsberg agreed on the inscrutability of history. I would like to join them in this and, having done so, to join them, too, in shedding further inscrutability by insisting on my own interpretation of Vietnam.

Mr. Schlesinger pitted his revised version of the quagmire thesis (it was all a mistake, a lot of wishful thinking) against Mr. Ellsberg's anti-quagmire thesis (it was all clear-sighted malice aforethought). In the process, Mr. Schlesinger has wrongly lumped my views with those of Mr. Ellsberg.

I do not agree with either gentleman. In order to explain this, to show why I disagree especially with Mr. Schlesinger, and to argue that the optimism versus pessimism issue is not, to my mind, the central Vietnam issue, I am compelled, embarrassingly, to briefly quote myself. In an article in *Foreign Policy*, "Vietnam: The System Worked," I wrote that three propositions suggest why the United States became involved in Vietnam, why the process was gradual, and what the real expectations of our leaders were:

First, US involvement in Vietnam is not mainly or mostly a story of step by step, inadvertent descent into unforeseen quicksand. It is primarily a story of why US leaders considered that it was vital not to lose Vietnam by force to Communism. Our leaders believed Vietnam to be vital not for itself, but for what they thought its "loss" would mean internationally and domestically.

The point I meant to make is that the forces driving American actions in Vietnam were, strategically, a belief that the world was filled with domi-

noes—a psychology based on strategic links as well as on the Munich analogy, and notions of prestige; and 2) domestically, a belief that political instability and ungovernability would inevitably flow from the loss of a country to communism—the pathology of anti-communism. These forces, more than predictions of either success or failure, caused our leaders to plunge on. To put it another way, our leaders persisted in Vietnam neither because they were promised victory nor because they anticipated defeat, but because they believed they had to: "They 'saw' no acceptable alternative." This is largely what I meant by the statement quoted by both Messrs. Ellsberg and Schlesinger that "US involvement did not stem from a failure to foresee consequences." Both, however, chose to assume that this statement solely concerned the anti-quagmire thesis.

Mr. Ellsberg and I also differ on the emphasis to be placed on domestic and international forces. Mr. Ellsberg would have us now believe that the overriding reason for American involvement in Vietnam was that our Presidents and their key advisers wanted to retain the White House and keep their jobs. Such motives were undoubtedly present to some extent. Kenneth O'Donnell told us in an article in *Life* that President Kennedy told Senator Mansfield that he wanted to get out of Vietnam, but would have to wait until after the 1964 elections. President Johnson freely admits that he was worried about a right-wing McCarthyite reaction should the communists win.

But have we so completely forgotten the acceptance during the Fifties and Sixties of the psychological correctness of the domino theory (if we don't resist here, they'll test us there and there, etc.) that we now deny that our leaders ever believed it? Mr. Schlesinger certainly understands this point. In *The Bitter Heritage* he asserted: "Our stake in South Vietnam may have been self-created, but it has nonetheless become real. Our precipitate withdrawal now would have ominous reverberations throughout Asia" (p. 21). And: "We must have enough American armed force in South Vietnam to leave no doubt in the minds of our adver-

saries that a communist government will not be imposed on South Vietnam by force" (p. 106).

Mr. Ellsberg believed the same thing well into 1967. Just because he stopped believing it does not mean that most others (including myself) in and out of government were not similarly misguided in the past. Our leaders had mixed motives but, I would submit, they plowed on in Vietnam mainly to preserve American prestige and to avoid a larger war elsewhere; and most Americans shared this line of reasoning.

My second proposition was:

Our Presidents were never actually seeking a military victory in Vietnam. They were doing only what they thought was minimally necessary at each stage to keep Indo-

china, and later South Vietnam, out of Communist hands. This forced our Presidents to be brackmen, to do less than those who were urging military victory and to reject proposals for disengagement. It also meant that our Presidents wanted a negotiated settlement without fully realizing (though realizing more than their critics) that a civil war cannot be ended by political compromise.

After their consultation, Messrs. Schlesinger and Ellsberg apparently agreed that my concept of the "minimum necessary step" makes sense. (Mr. Schlesinger, however, neglected to mention that this was my position to begin with.) This concept is worth dwelling on for a moment, for it does bear on my version of the anti-quagmire thesis.

The Pentagon Papers show beyond question that Presidents rarely, if ever, bought the maximum proposals advanced by their advisers. This is a critical fact, because only those proposals for the maximum use of force (with the exception, at times, of the pacification program) were accompanied by promises of victory. Thus, as Mr. Ellsberg pointed out in his *Public Policy* article, Taylor and Rostow, McNamara and Rusk were giving President Kennedy a straightforward message in November, 1961: Accept all of the Taylor proposals and make an unequivocal commitment now or else we will expect very much improvement

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